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Title: Welding program designed to help former tobacco growers

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Lead:

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COALTON — The trailer behind Dusty Haight's Chevy pickup isn't much to look at.

The frame came from a derelict camper. He put it on an axle and rusty leaf springs from a Model A Ford.

The Greenup County farmer is proud of it anyway, because he built the body, welding every joint on it himself.

A little more than a month ago, Haight didn't know much about welding. He and 11 other farmers are learning the basics in a course at Ashland Community and Technical College.

It's a course designed for former tobacco farmers and funded with tobacco buyout money — funds set aside to help with the transition to other income sources or to farm more efficiently, said ACTC spokesman John McGlone.

The first four weeks of the eight-week course are devoted to basic techniques, said instructor Curtis Bowman. The class was in its fifth week Saturday and the farmers are moving into more advanced topics, Bowman said.

Like Haight, many of them already have built utility trailers or other implements they'll use on the farm.

They're also looking forward to putting their new skills to work on equipment they already have.

Farming tools take a pounding, with dragging in the dirt to plant and harvest crops, Haight said.

"When we break something, we'll be able to fix it ourselves," he said. "I'll save a lot of money."

"There's always something breaking down," said Greg Graham of Greenup County.

Graham doesn't see welding as a career in itself; he already has a job. He's mainly interested in the applications around his place.

"There's so much you can do with it," he said.

Unlike some of the others, Graham isn't making anything during class time. Instead he's polishing his command of the craft.

"I'd rather learn what I'm doing and make things later," he said.

The course has a major fringe benefit. Once they complete the course, the students will take home their own welder, worth around \$600, Bowman said.

It's possible that ACTC will be able to offer the course again next year, he said.

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